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WRITING STRATEGIES USED BY MALAYSIAN ESL UNDERGRADUATES

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ABSTRACT

Writing strategies are deemed important to enable learners to write well in academic contexts in higher education. This study examined the writing strategies of English as Second Language (ESL) undergraduates in higher education to look into the type of writing strategies they use. The five categories of writing strategies focused on were rhetorical strategies, metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, communicative strategies, and social/affective strategies. The sample of this study comprised 40 students from the social science disciplines in a local public university. The instrument used to collect data was questionnaire. The results showed that the students used all five categories of writing strategies. However, metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies as well as social/affective strategies were used slightly more compared to communicative strategies and rhetorical strategies. This study has implications for ESL student writers and instructors on writing strategies that can be used to facilitate academic writing.

Keywords: *writing strategies, undergraduates, writing.*

INTRODUCTION

Writing, an integral aspect of learning and assessment is important for success in both higher education and in professional contexts (McKenna, 2011; Hasegawa, 2013). However, writing in higher education is a difficult task for English as a Second Language (ESL) undergraduates as it involves dealing with factors such as conventions of academic writing, academic discourse, genres for various disciplines, different text-types as well as ethics in academic writing (Ofte, 2014; Lee, 2013, 2014, 2015; Rafik-Galea, Arumugam & de Mello, 2012). It also demands student writers to be actively engaged in their thinking and writing processes (Ofte, 2014).

In view of the challenging nature of writing, writing strategies are viewed as vital to assist ESL learners in facilitating their abilities in writing (Lei, 2008) and should be taught (Mimi Estonella & Nooreiny, 2014). With regard to writing strategies, different classifications have been proposed and researched on (Arndt, 1987, Wenden, 1991, Victori, 1995, Riazzi, 1977, Sasaki, 2000 & Mu, 2005 cited in Mu, 2005) to understand and enhance students' writing. Mu's (2005) Taxonomy of ESL Writing Strategies investigated ESL writing strategies based on the synthesis of past research on writing strategies and the four dominant theories: Contrastive Rhetoric Theory, Cognitive Development Theory, Communication Theory and Social Constructionist Theory which have given writing strategies a theoretical basis. This taxonomy comprises five categories: rhetorical strategies, metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, communicative strategies and social/ affective strategies. Rhetorical strategies refer to organisation and presentation of ideas in conventions of writing stipulated as acceptable to L1 speakers of English. Metacognitive strategies involve mental operations used in regulating learning and cognitive strategies involve learning new information and its application (Wenden, 1991 in Mu, 2005). Communicative strategies refer to strategies used to enhance effective expression of ideas during writing while social/affective strategies revolve around the involvement with others, accessing resources and regulating emotions in writing (Mu, 2005). In view of the theoretical nature of Mu's (2005) Taxonomy of ESL Writing Strategies Taxonomy, it was used as the framework of this study.

Research on writing strategies among L2 learners has diverse findings. Wong (2005) found that L2 writers commonly used metacognitive, cognitive and affective strategies in composing; nevertheless, individual writers use different strategies. Meanwhile, Mu and Carrington (2007) found that Chinese L2 writers used rhetorical strategies, metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and social/affective strategies. Arab L2 learners used rhetorical, metacognitive, cognitive, communicative and social/affective strategies while writing (Nor Fariza, Tan & Noraini, 2012). As for Malaysian L2 writers, it is indicated that they generally used cognitive strategies, metacognitive and social strategies (Muhammad Ridhuan et al., 2011; Saeid Raoofi, Chan, Jayakaran & Sabariah, 2014). Research indicates that proficient writers used more rhetorical strategies (Sasaki, 2000) and metacognitive strategies (Wei, Shang & Briody, 2012; Saeid Raoofi et al., 2014). Besides, the more and less proficient students showed differences in their level of use of strategies, why they use the strategies and how the strategies are self-regulated in writing (Muhammad Ridhuan et al., 2011). Good use of writing strategies had been correlated with improved ability and fluency in writing (Sasaki, 2007) while poor level of use resulted in poor writing performance (Enas Abdullah, 2013). Such literature on writing strategies provides knowledge useful to improve students' writing. However, there is limited research with regard to writing strategies of ESL writers in the Malaysian context (Muhammad Ridhuan et al., 2011; Nooreiny & Mazlin, 2013; Mimi Estonella & Nooreiny, 2014; Saeid Raoofi et al., 2014) and this study hoped to address this gap. Moreover, literature indicates a gap in research in writing strategies encompassing the five categories (Sasaki, 2000; Mu, 2005; Wong, 2005; Sasaki, 2007; Wei, Shang & Briody, 2012) posited in Mu's taxonomy which is the framework of this study. Thus, this study looked into the categories of writing strategies used by Malaysian ESL undergraduates in their writing and to provide insights into student's engagement in their writing and for instructors to facilitate student writing.

METHOD

The sample of this study comprised 40 ESL undergraduates from the Social Science discipline in a local public university in Malaysia. They were in their first and second year at the university. They ranged mainly from competent (70%) to good (30%) users of English as indicated by their bands for the

Malaysian University English Test (MUET). A questionnaire was used to collect data. It consisted of five categories of writing strategies as specified in Mu's (2005) Taxonomy of ESL Writing Strategies. They are rhetorical strategies, metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, communicative strategies and social/affective strategies with various sub strategies. There were eight sub strategies for rhetorical strategies, eleven for metacognitive strategies, and twelve for cognitive strategies, four for communicative strategies and nine for social/affective strategies. The students were asked to rate the writing strategies they used based on a four point scale ranging from 1 to 4: 1 for Strongly Disagree, 2 for Disagree, 3 for Agree and 4 for Strongly Agree.

The results of this study were analysed and presented descriptively and inferentially. Descriptively, the levels of writing strategies used were presented in terms of means. The values of means exemplify the rating scales. The scales ranged from '1' to '4', namely '1' represents 'strongly disagree', '2' represents 'Disagree', '3' represents 'Agree', and '4' represents 'Strongly Agree'. Thus, a lower value of means was interpreted as 'the rated strategy was used less compared to the others'. On the other hand, the levels of writing strategies were also presented inferentially to determine the significant levels of agreement on the use of the strategy. The level of agreement was defined from the scales of measurement. The range of scales was defined from '1' to '4'. Specifically, the values of disagreement fall in the range of 1 to 2 (namely '1' represents 'Strongly Disagree', '2' represents 'Disagree'). On the other hand, the values of agreement fall in the range of 3 to 4 (namely '3' represents 'Agree' and '4' represents 'Strongly Agree'). Hence, the scale '2' or 'less than 2' illustrates 'disagree' on the use of the strategy or the level of usage is low compared to others as perceived by the students. Similarly, the scale '3' or 'more than 3' illustrates 'agree' on the use the strategy or the level of usage is high compared to others as perceived by the students. Statistically the values fall between '2' and '3' are not interpreted as either 'agree' or 'disagree' since the values fall within the range (2 to 3) such as '2.7' would not carry any level of agreement; hence, the justification of a boundary is needed to justify the cutting point or tested value for the agreement. Statistically, the boundary determines the falls of any value into the interval of 'agree' or the interval of 'disagree'. Since the boundary between 'range 1 to 2' and 'range 3 to 4' is '2.5', the value '2.5' is determined as a tested value in the testing of significance of agreement on the use of the strategy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section first presents and discusses the findings for the mean for the categories of writing strategies followed by the detailed results for the five categories of writing strategies.

Mean of Writing Strategies

Table 1: Mean of Categories of Writing Strategies

Categories of Writing Strategies	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Rhetoric	2.68	.381
Metacognitive	2.95	.397
Cognitive	2.92	.317
Communicative	2.78	.444
Social/Affective	2.91	.356

Table 1 shows that all the categories of writing strategies that were used comparably by the undergraduates. From the five categories of writing strategies, metacognitive strategies was rated (mean=2.95 with a standard deviation=0.397) and cognitive strategies (mean=2.92 with standard deviation=0.317) as well as social/affective strategies with a (mean=2.91 and a standard deviation=0.356) which were used slightly more compared to communicative strategies (mean=2.78 with standard deviation=0.356) and rhetorical strategies (mean=2.68 with standard deviation=0.381). Descriptively, the results illustrate that metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and social/affective strategies were used slightly differently compared to communicative strategies and rhetorical strategies.

Categories of Writing Strategies

The detailed findings for the five categories of writing strategies are discussed as below.

Rhetorical Strategies

Table 2: Rhetorical Strategies Used by the Undergraduates

Rhetorical Strategies	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
	2.68	.381
I organise my introduction from general to specific ideas.	3.10	.436
I organise the developmental paragraphs appropriately, for e.g. order of importance, chronological order, spatial order, etc.	2.88	.600
I organise the ending from specific to general ideas.	2.98	.474
I use my first language (L1) to plan my paragraphs.	2.22	.822
I use my first language (L1) to plan my sentences.	2.22	.759
I translate my ideas into English.	2.29	.782
I rationalise the format needed for my writing.	2.85	.615
I use others' writing as models.	2.90	.735

Table 2 shows that in terms of rhetorical strategies, the strategy “I organise my introduction from general to specific ideas” was rated descriptively the highest (mean=3.10 with a standard deviation=0.436) compared to the other strategies. This was followed by “I organise the ending from specific to general ideas” (mean=2.98 with standard deviation=0.474). This reflects the students’ awareness of organising strategies for the introduction and the conclusion parts in their writing. The students also used others’ writing as models (mean=2.90 with standard deviation 0.735) when they write. This could be their attempt to replicate others’ writing to meet accepted academic conventions. The strategies rated descriptively lower than the rest were “I use my first language (L1) to plan my paragraphs” (mean=2.22 with standard deviation=0.822) and “I use my first language (L1) to plan my sentences” (mean=2.22 with standard deviation=0.759). This could be due to the students’ competence and proficiency in the English Language.

Table 3: One-Sample Test for Rhetorical Strategies

Test Value = 2.5						
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Rhetorical	3.021	40	.004	.180	.06	.30

The mean of 2.68 (use of Rhetorical strategies) is descriptively higher than the tested value (the boundary between ‘agree’ and ‘disagree’), hence a one sample t test was conducted to test the significance of the level. Table 3 shows that the level of usage is significantly different from the test value 2.5 with sig <0.05; thus, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that the students significantly agree on the usage of Rhetorical strategies.

Metacognitive Strategies

Table 4: Metacognitive Strategies Used by the Undergraduates

Metacognitive Strategies	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
	2.95	.397
I find the focus for my writing before I start writing.	3.07	.608
I plan the content sequence for my writing.	2.98	.612
I plan how to complete the writing task.	2.90	.583
I make an outline.	2.93	.608
I check my progress on my writing task.	2.80	.641
I check my comprehension of my writing and identify problems about it.	3.00	.548
I check my writing product and identify problems about it.	2.98	.570
I review my writing to see how well I have accomplished it.	3.07	.648
I review my purpose in writing.	2.90	.625
I evaluate how well I have used writing strategies.	2.80	.679
I identify changes that I will implement when I have to do a similar writing task another time.	3.00	.447

Table 4 shows that in terms of metacognitive strategies, the strategies “I find the focus for my writing before I start writing” and “I review my writing to see how well I have accomplished it” were rated descriptively higher with a mean=3.07. The strategies rated descriptively lower than the rest of the strategies were “I check my progress on my writing task” (mean=2.80 with standard deviation=0.641) and “I evaluate how well I have used writing strategies” (mean=2.80 with standard deviation=0.9). The findings show that the students used mental processes to regulate their writing. They deciphered, checked, planned and evaluated aspects of the writing task. However, their metacognitive awareness in writing appeared to be more related to genre-relevant concepts vital to academic writing rather than that of critical reflection akin to Mirador’s findings (2011).

Table 5: One-Sample Test for Metacognitive Strategies

Test Value = 2.5						
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Metacognitive	7.236	40	.000	.449	.32	.57

The mean of 2.95 (use of metacognitive strategies) is descriptively higher than the tested value (the boundary between ‘agree’ and ‘disagree’), hence a one sample t test was conducted to test the significance of the level. Table 5 shows that the level of usage is significantly different from the test value 2.5 with sig <0.05; thus, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that the students significantly agree on the usage of metacognitive strategies.

Cognitive Strategies

Table 6: Cognitive Strategies Used by the Undergraduates

Cognitive Strategies	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
	2.92	.317
I use lead-in words to generate ideas.	2.88	.510
I repeat words to generate ideas.	2.73	.501

I infer ideas from my reading for my writing.	3.07	.469
I change my plan/outline when I write.	2.95	.590
I change my content when I write.	2.63	.623
I change my organisation when I write.	2.68	.610
I revise the language in my writing.	3.00	.500
I elaborate on the content in my writing.	3.07	.412
I use my background knowledge to help me write.	3.20	.401
I try out different ideas when I write.	2.98	.689
I try out language when I write.	2.78	.652
I summarise and synthesise information.	3.02	.570

Table 6 shows that in terms of cognitive strategies, the strategy, “I use my background knowledge to help me write” was rated descriptively highest (mean=3.20 with standard deviation=.401) among the strategies. This shows that students rely on their existing knowledge to accomplish new writing task. This is because background knowledge supplies writers with “critical guidance ... specific points to develop and questions to ask that might not have occurred to them if they knew less about the subject” (Deane et al., 2008, p.48). This was followed by “I infer ideas from my reading for my writing” and “I elaborate on the content in my writing” with a mean of 3.07. These strategies highlight the students’ awareness of reading to generate and support content in writing (Deane, 2008). The cognitive strategy rated descriptively lowest was “I change my content when I write” (mean= 2.63 with standard deviation=.623) and this was preceded by “I change my organisation when I write” (mean=2.68 with standard deviation=.610). This concurs with Lee’s (2014) previous findings that only a small percentage (32%) of L2 undergraduates revised their content in writing.

Table 7: One-Sample Test for Cognitive Strategies

Test Value = 2.5					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
					Lower Upper
Cognitive	8.422	40	.000	.417	.32 .52

The mean of 2.92 (use of cognitive strategies) is descriptively higher than the tested value (the boundary between ‘agree’ and ‘disagree’), hence a one sample t test was conducted to test the significance of the level. Table 7 shows that the level of usage is significantly different from the test value 2.5 with sig <0.05; thus, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that the students significantly agree on the usage of cognitive strategies.

Communicative Strategies

Table 8: Communicative Strategies Used by the Undergraduates

Communicative Strategies	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
	2.78	.444
I have my audience in mind when I write.	2.78	.690
I paraphrase to avoid a problem in writing.	3.00	.671
I give up on a difficult area (for e.g., stop trying to solve it) in writing to avoid it.	2.54	.745
I remove a difficult area from my writing text so that I can express my ideas better.	2.80	.679

Table 8 shows that in terms of communicative strategies, the strategy “I paraphrase to avoid a problem in writing” was rated descriptively highest (mean=3.00 with standard deviation=0.671) among the items. The communicative strategy rated descriptively lowest was “I give up on a difficult area (for e.g., stop trying to solve it) in writing to avoid it” (mean = 2.54 with standard deviation= 0.745). The findings depict that the students used communicative strategies differently to alleviate problems in their writing so that they can express ideas better in writing.

Table 9: One-Sample Test for Communicative Strategies

Test Value = 2.5					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
					Lower Upper
Communicative	4.041	40	.000	.280	.14 .42

The mean of 2.78 (use of communicative strategies) is descriptively higher than the tested value (the boundary between ‘agree’ and ‘disagree’), a one sample t test was conducted to test the significance of the level. Table 9 shows that the level of usage is significantly different from the test value 2.5 with sig <0.05; thus, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that the students significantly agree on the usage of communicative strategies.

Social/Affective Strategies

Table 10: Social/Affective Strategies Used by the Undergraduates

Social/Affective Strategies	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
	2.91	.356
I use libraries to locate information.	2.49	.711
I use internet to locate information	3.51	.506
I use a dictionary to help me write.	2.98	.612
I get feedback on my writing from my peers.	2.59	.774
I get feedback on my writing from my instructors.	2.59	.591
I break up my writing load into manageable parts to prevent stress.	2.63	.799
I take a rest when I am tired from writing.	3.39	.666
I motivate myself to write.	3.10	.664
I take suitable steps to avoid anxiety in writing.	2.93	.721

Table 10 shows that in terms of social/affective strategies, the strategy, “I use Internet to locate information” was rated descriptively highest (mean=3.51 with standard deviation=0.506) among the strategies. This was

followed by “I take a rest when I am tired from writing” (mean=3.39 and standard deviation=0.666) and “I motivate myself to write” (mean=3.10 and standard deviation=0.664). The social/affective strategy rated descriptively lowest by the students was “I use libraries to locate information” (mean=2.49 with standard deviation=0.711). This was preceded by the strategies “I get feedback on my writing from my peers” and “I get feedback on my writing from my instructors” with a mean of 2.59. The findings on the highest and the lowest rated strategies are not surprising as students preferred to use technology in their process of learning. The findings also show that they self-regulated their emotions in writing. Getting feedback was utilised to an extent and interestingly, both peers and instructors who were the sources for their feedback were given similar importance.

Table 11: One-Sample Test for Social/Affective Strategies

Test Value = 2.5						
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Social/Affective	7.386	40	.000	.411	.30	.52

The mean of 2.91 (use of social/affective strategies), hence is descriptively higher than the tested value (the boundary between ‘agree’ and ‘disagree’), a one sample t test was conducted to test the significance of the level. Table 11 shows that the level of usage is significantly different from the test value 2.5 with sig <0.05: thus, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that the students significantly agree on the usage of social/affective strategies.

CONCLUSION

This study depicts that Malaysian ESL undergraduates utilise five categories of writing strategies. They are rhetorical strategies, metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, communicative strategies and social/affective strategies. However, their levels of use of the strategies in these categories are varied. The study’s findings with regard to the students’ use of rhetorical strategies and communicative strategies add on to the existing literature on

L2 writers. Previous findings indicate that Malaysian L2 writers generally used cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies and social strategies in writing (Muhammad Ridhuan et al., 2011; Saeid Raoofi et al., 2014). Other L2 writers are found to often use the four categories of writing strategies: rhetorical strategies, metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and social/ affective except communicative strategies (Sasaki, 2000; Wong, 2005; Mu & Carrington, 2007; Nor Fariza, Tan & Noraini, 2012; Wei, Shang & Briody, 2012).

The salient findings of this study are as follows. Students show awareness of organisational strategies and refer to writing models under rhetorical strategies. They also have metacognitive awareness but it is more related to genre-relevant concepts in writing rather than critical reflection. As for cognitive strategies, generating content is prioritised over making changes to content and organisation in writing. Next, communicative strategies such as paraphrasing and leaving a problem in writing are compensatory ways students used to fill in gaps in writing. Lastly, for social/ affective strategies, students rely on the Internet to obtain information and self-regulate their emotions to write better. An interesting finding for social/ affective strategies is that feedback is less used and both teachers and peers are viewed as equal in providing feedback. These findings have implications for the teaching and learning of writing in L2 contexts in that undergraduates should be given explicit guidance on using writing strategies in a more efficient manner to enhance writing success in higher education.

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